

# *Fear of imprecision as the beginning of wisdom: commentary on 'Definitional Drift Within the Science of Forgiveness'*

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Fear of Imprecision as the Beginning of Wisdom:

Commentary on ‘Definitional Drift Within the Science of Forgiveness’

David S. Oderberg

Flight from definition, and from the metaphysical essentialism underlying definition, is a feature of what the authors of ‘Definitional Drift Within the Science of Forgiveness’ call ‘modernist compartmentalisation’. There is, as they rightly indicate, a tendency to mistake parts for wholes, to take one facet of an entity as capturing its entirety. Such a practice itself tends to go hand in hand with reductionism, where a whole is identified with a component or components of interest. As a result, the very **AUTHOR DRAFT ONLY.** *wholeness* of a whole is lost, by which I mean a grasp of the *unity* of the entity under examination, where all of its components work together in a distinctive way to mark that unity out from all other unities in the world. **NOT FOR CITATION OR CIRCULATION.**

Such compartmentalisation is as true of the approach to *virtues* as of the **NO REPRODUCTION IN ANY FORM IS PERMITTED.** approach to understanding the humans who have them. Philosophers have held views such as that a human is just a mind, or a body, or a soul, or a brain (see Noonan 2019 for a useful overview); others, of a more Aristotelian inclination, have held humans to be something more holistic – a rational animal with all of the features listed. Virtues, although less substantial, are no less real than us humans, and can be subject to similar misunderstandings. There are non-moral virtues, such as being strong or having a good memory. One might mistakenly think that to be strong is simply to be able to lift a certain weight, whereas there is far more to strength to this; or that to have a good memory is no more than being able to recall names and faces with perfect accuracy – again missing most of what is involved in having this virtue.

When it comes to *moral* virtue – that by which philosophers and psychologists

are so often exercised – we know that Socrates was famous for testing his interlocutors with questions about definitions, proposing reductionist hypotheses he then mercilessly criticised: ‘Justice is speaking the truth and paying your debts’ (*Republic*, Book 1, 331c2-3, Reeve 2019: 5); ‘Piety is what is dear to the gods’ (*Euthyphro* 7a1-2, Cooper 1997: 6). Much of philosophy, throughout its history, has been an endless debate over definitions, as well it should be. If we do not know *what* something is, in its very essence, then we do not know – except by some kind of accident or miracle – how it relates to other things, how to characterise it more generally, what its significance is in the scheme of things – not least its *practical* significance. When it comes to *forgiveness*, as the authors rightly complain, if psychologists are not able to define it – and, one hopes, reach a broad agreement on that definition – then how are they

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supposed to engage in the right kind of therapy to *counsel* and *assist* people in **NOT THE OFFICIAL PUBLISHED VERSION.**  
practising and perfecting this important virtue? If we literally do not know what we are talking about, then we are not of much help to anyone.  
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In this vein, the authors lament the gulf that has opened up between **NO REPRODUCTION IN ANY FORM IS PERMITTED.** philosophy and psychology in many areas, laying the blame more at the foot of the psychologists than the philosophers. Philosophers engage often with the empirical and theoretical work of psychologists in cognitive science, linguistic behaviour, and brain function, among other areas, but psychologists do not appear to be much interested in what philosophers have to say about virtues, not least that of *forgiveness*. I can report my own dismay at discovering the existence of quite large but parallel literatures on *forgiveness* in both psychology and philosophy. There is far less interaction between these literatures than I would have expected. All the more encouraging, then, that the authors address their fellow psychologists head on with what they call, in line with tradition, ‘Aristotelian Classical Realism’. This, broadly, is the philosophical tradition beginning with Aristotle (albeit without ignoring how much he was influenced by Plato

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and others), moving through the Middle Ages and the Scholastic philosophers – most notably Aquinas – and into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the neo-Thomist revival of the late nineteenth century, the neo-Aristotelian revival of the late twentieth, and the ongoing rigorous work done by philosophers inspired by this broad, realist school of thought.

The key tool of Classical Realism is its laser-like essentialism and commitment to rigorous definition. The strict Aristotelian method of definition is that of Porphyry and his famous ‘tree’ (Barnes 2003). Surprisingly, there does not seem to be a technical term for the *specific* Porphyrian structure in computing, logic, or mathematics, but the Tree belongs to the general kind of *binary* tree, where each node has at most two children. The purpose of the Tree is to define a kind of thing by a **AUTHOR DRAFT ONLY.** process of *filtration* of everything that is not it. You need already to know what the kind is: the Tree does not tell you what there is in the world. The job of telling you what there is in the world belongs – at its best – to a fruitful collaboration between science and philosophy, where philosophy provides the essentialist metaphysics and **NO REPRODUCTION IN ANY FORM IS PERMITTED.** accompanying epistemology, and science provides the observational data. Once you know what there is, the Tree enables you to *organise* your thinking so that you can locate the target kind – let’s say *essence* from now on rather than *kind*, since it is a more precise and traditional term – within a broader taxonomy. This general method applies as much to biology as to ecology, or physics, or chemistry, or economics, or history, and of course psychology – not least to the things, such as virtues, which are of particular interest to the authors.

So how might we define forgiveness? Of the alarmingly many definitions exhibited by the authors in Tables 1-8 at the end of their article, derived mainly from the psychological literature, many contradict each other, as well as often being vague, incomplete, and generally lacking in the necessary clarity and conceptual tightness.

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Speaking of the philosophical literature, Russell (2023: 2) registers ‘not so much a dazzling multitude as a buzzing profusion of philosophical accounts of forgiveness’. His own ‘Peaceful End Point’ account, which only loosely resembles a definition, takes a full chapter (ch.7) to spell out, and while it contains congenial elements it still lacks precision. So, unfortunately, I will not commend the philosophers of forgiveness over the psychologists of forgiveness when it comes to reducing ‘definitional drift’.

The authors are as worried as I am by all this confusion. Their article provides much food for thought, but there is more work to do. As they point out, the five Aristotelian ‘predicables’ of Classical Realism, as they are usually called, come into play: genus, species, difference, property, and accident. These are the ways in which we can characterise the instantiation by an entity of a universal under which it falls.

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Focusing on the all-important first three, since these are the tools for generating our definition, the authors suggest that forgiveness is a species of the genus *virtue* – ‘doing good particularly in the context of another’s injustice’ – with the difference (more verbosely the ‘specific difference’) being ‘the extension of such goodness to the one who unjustly hurt the forgiver even at a cost to the one who forgives’. Although this **NOT THE OFFICIAL PUBLISHED VERSION,** **NOT FOR CITATION OR CIRCULATION.** **NO REPRODUCTION IN ANY FORM IS PERMITTED.** points us in the right direction, we need to untangle a few knots. Let us take them one by one.

First, Aristotelian definitions are complexes composed of a genus and a difference: ‘man is a rational [difference] animal [genus]’; ‘gold is a metal [genus] with atomic number seventy nine [difference]’; ‘a fish is a water-dwelling vertebrate [genus] with gills at maturity [difference]’. Hence ‘doing good particularly in the context of another’s injustice’ will not be the *essence* – i.e. state the *species* – of forgiveness unless we take one part to be the genus and the other the difference. Presumably the idea is that ‘doing good’ is the genus and ‘particularly in the context of another’s injustice’ is the difference, yet neither of these seems right, not least because the

authors already propose as the difference ‘the extension of such goodness to the one who unjustly hurt the forgiver even at a cost to the one who forgives’ – and no species can have more than one specific difference. If, as the authors, think, the genus is *virtue* then *doing good* will not be the genus because a virtue is not simply the doing of good, but the *habitual* doing of *moral* good. (Remember we are talking about moral virtues.) A succinct definition of virtue is that it is a *good moral habit* (Glenn 1944: 126), and a vice is a *bad* moral habit: in other words, habits in the moral realm (as opposed to the non-moral virtues) partake of goodness or badness depending on whether they orientate the agent towards the good or the bad (of others or of themselves).

Secondly, suppose, then, we take the genus of forgiveness to be *virtue*: in other words, it is a species of virtue. Then what is the difference from the other virtues? We have on the table (a) ‘particularly in the context of another’s injustice’ and (b) ‘the extension of such goodness to the one who unjustly hurt the forgiver even at a cost to the one who forgives’. I have pointed out that no species can have two differences; is there a reason to choose one of the above? Choosing (a) is problematic since there are many virtues whose performance occurs ‘particularly’ (the vagueness of this term is worrisome in its own right) in the context of another’s injustice, even if – as is evidently implied – we restrict the injustice to that committed by another against the forgiver. (Leave aside so-called ‘third-party forgiveness’ and ‘self-forgiveness’, on which see Russell 2023: 61-3.) There are virtues of mercy, patience, and toleration, among others. What about (b)? Again, one can extend goodness to the wrongdoer precisely by showing them mercy, patience, or toleration, even if to do so is psychically or emotionally costly.

The above critique is not meant to suggest that the authors do not have greater definitional resources at their disposal. Rather, my point is that we must guard against looseness of formulation, which also means being strict in adherence to the Porphyrian

protocol. The authors offer a more narrative ‘concise definition’, into which they pack:

(i) a motivation to be good to the wrongdoer; (ii) a ‘cognitive striving’ to reduce negative judgments and see the ‘personhood’ in the wrongdoer; (iii) a reduction of ‘negative affect’ along with the development of compassion and empathy toward the wrongdoer; and (iv) a reduction of ‘negative behaviours’ accompanied by action in ‘good ways’ towards the wrongdoer. This is a rich mix of central, superfluous, and also vague notions from which we can move towards something more precise after some pruning. Cleary, as a start, we can see that merely being a virtue is not enough for the genus of forgiveness. As already suggested, some virtues can be concerned with your response to a wrong done against you (not exclusively, e.g. you can show mercy to someone who has not wronged you directly, and be tolerant of many evils that do not

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affect you yourself), which is taxonomically and ethically salient. So we should, I

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suggest, state the genus of forgiveness to be. *Virtue inciting a person to respond to someone who has wronged them*, where the ellipsis must be completed by the

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specific difference.

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The authors give us, as material for the difference, (i) – (iv) above. I propose eliminating the ‘personhood’ requirement of (ii) both for vagueness and otioseness. It is hard to know what it means to ‘see the personhood’ in someone, though it might simply be to treat them as a person – and this we do to each other the vast bulk of the time. So it seems to be more of a background assumption of the entire discussion: to see the wrongdoer as a wrongdoer, and to contemplate a virtuous response, is to see them as a person – a freely acting agent, with sufficient knowledge to appreciate what they have done, at least minimally (even if they think what they did was justified, or if their grasp of good and evil was shaky, as in the case of a child before the age of reason).

We should also fold the ‘action in good ways’ of (iv) into the ‘motivation to be good’ because if you are motivated – *moved* – to be good to the wrongdoer, you *will* act

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in good ways toward them unless prevented by circumstances, for example if the wrongdoer is out of reach. Hence action should be understood or implicit in the motivation, and it is enough to require the forgiver to be motivated to beneficence towards the wrongdoer. Note that this is not the same as mere benevolence. The authors are correct that a focus on ‘emotional forgiveness’ only, which we can construe broadly to include well-wishing, is only one aspect of the whole. The inclusion of the ‘development of compassion and empathy’ is a rather strong requirement: you can forgive without feeling compassion or empathy, although one might insist that the forgiver should at least feel sorry for the wrongdoer *insofar* as they have done wrong albeit for no other reason. Perhaps it is not a stretch to bring such a feeling within benevolence, the upshot being that we require forgiveness to include both benevolence

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and the motivation to beneficence.

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There remains the negative aspect of forgiveness. We can leave aside the idea of ‘cognitive striving’ as a rhetorical flourish, focusing on the reduction of negative emotions, negative judgments, and negative behaviour. It is surely correct that the

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essence of forgiveness includes a diminution of negative attitudes *and* actions. Of

interest is that in the New Testament, the term for forgiveness is *aphesis*, which derives etymologically from ‘to release’, ‘send away’, ‘put aside’ (Liddell and Scott 1996: 288). (The OT Hebrew *slachah* has a primitive root; see Thomas ed. 1981: 1567.) We typically have in mind attitudes and actions of personal vengeance or hatred, forgiveness being wholly consistent with the continuing desire for, and attempt to achieve, justice in what is traditionally called the ‘external forum’ – the courts of public opinion and of the state. The forgiver need not put aside the demand for punishment and might even act *wrongly* in putting it aside.

That said, ‘negative’ is too vague to be part of the specific difference, and ‘negative judgment’ seems inapt here. For you can surely forgive another while still

judging them to be a wrongdoer, a bad person for what they did. Indeed it is not clear how you could desire punishment, and justice more generally, if you did *not* make negative judgments such as these. You can also forgive someone while judging them as a person *to be avoided*, perhaps by the whole community. On the other hand, judging them to be in some way ‘beneath’ you, or morally inferior more broadly, or worthy of nothing but contempt, or deserving of nothing but future suffering, beyond hope or redemption, does seem inconsistent with genuine forgiveness. I suggest, then, that we roll all of the negative clauses in the concise definition into a single clause along the lines of: a diminution of attitudes and behaviour that conflict with either benevolence or the motivation to beneficence, on one hand, or with the seeking after justice and the preservation of one’s own well-being, on the other.

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For example, the feeling of personal vengeance conflicts with benevolence, as is the judgment that the wrongdoer is beneath you or worthy of nothing but contempt.

Actively seeking vengeance conflicts with the motivation to beneficence. When it

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comes to justice, a person cannot forgive if they *condone* the wrongful act, if they *minimise* its gravity, if they make *excuses* for the wrongdoer, try to *justify* their

behaviour, and so on. Again, wanting something bad to happen to the wrongdoer, not as a matter of personal vengeance but of more general ‘payback’, is inconsistent with seeking after justice. (In the latter case we usually speak of ‘poetic justice’, which can be emotionally satisfying but is not a case of real justice.) Further, a person cannot forgive if they act in a way that conflicts with well-being, for example *humiliating* themselves before the wrongdoer, *accepting* that they themselves are somehow *responsible* for the wrong even if they are not, if they harbour *grudges* or *bitterness* that eats away at their psychic health, and so on.

One might object that the specific difference just proposed is internally contradictory. After all, wanting something bad to happen to the wrongdoer will make

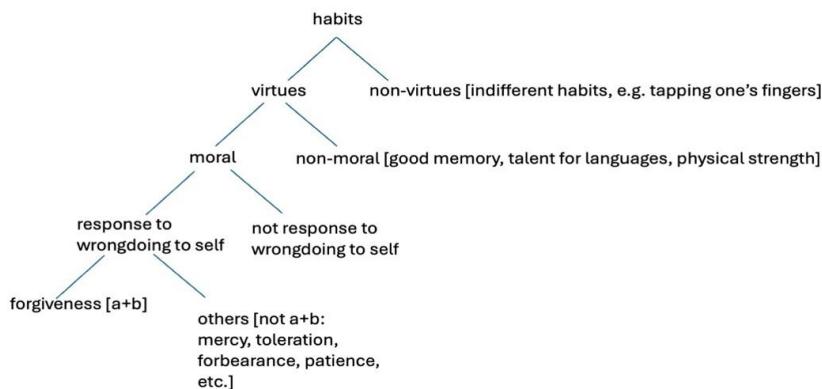
you feel better and give personal satisfaction, won't it? And isn't the desire for lawful punishment something that goes against benevolence? It takes a holistic understanding of personality and integrity of character – preferably along broadly Aristotelian lines – to see through this specious objection. This is one way psychology can play such an important role in helping a person reach forgiveness. The separation of legitimate from illegitimate responses, within the context of forgiveness, is all important. Wanting something bad to happen to the wrongdoer, although a natural feeling that does not render the victim bad themselves, might give short-term satisfaction but at the expense of longer-term acceptance of their situation and even a certain necessary detachment from past victimhood. Again, it is not inconsistent with benevolence – indeed, I would argue it *is* a kind of benevolence – to want the wrongdoer to see justice at the hands of

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the lawful authority. It is good *for the wrongdoer* to be made to face the consequences of their actions in the right and proper way, avoiding personal score-settling and anarchic vigilanteism (assuming a lawful authority exists to administer the punishment).  
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Let's put all this together according to Aristotelian procedure. According to  
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my analysis:

DEFINITION: Forgiveness is a [genus] virtue inclining a person, who has been the victim of wrongdoing at the hands of another, to [difference] (a) both benevolence and the motivation to beneficence towards the wrongdoer, and (b) a diminution of attitudes and behaviour that conflict with either: (i) benevolence or the motivation to beneficence, on one hand; or with (ii) the seeking after justice and the preservation of one's own well-being, on the other.

Visually, we can locate forgiveness thus:



DEFINITION is, to be sure, a mouthful, but there is no requirement for definitions to be brief or concise relative to some external standard (such as word count, number of concepts involved, ability to be memorised, etc.), but they must be as brief or concise as can be relative to the internal standard of simple accuracy. That said, we want our definitions to be relatively comprehensible to a person of reasonable intelligence, and I propose that DEFINITION passes the test. This is especially important since, as the authors repeatedly emphasise, defining forgiveness is not a mere intellectual exercise, but a requirement to bring a person to *feel* and *experience* the benefits of therapy, to reach forgiveness.

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Again, as the authors rightly indicate, doing so is particularly difficult. The perfection of virtue is something we should all aim for but to which only the saintly minority ever come close. This is not, however, a counsel of despair: rather, it is the proposal of an ideal we all must, and *can*, pursue with success even if we do not attain it (such being the nature of ideals). We are fortunate – if we care about moral goodness – that virtue is *not* an all-or-nothing matter. That said, of all the virtues, forgiveness is in the top tier of those that are particularly difficult to practise. It makes demands of us that rub against our deepest and most natural feelings of offence, hurt, resentment, hostility, and vengeance. Overcoming these requires an almost supernatural effort (and

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for a theist, this is literally the case, hence the need for grace). Such natural feelings are not to be deplored, nor are they matters of shame. Just as recognising the wrongdoer as a free agent is more a preliminary to forgiveness than part of its essence, so the recognition of the existence and *naturalness* – the virtual *propriety* on a more animalistic level, if I can put it indelicately – of our ‘negative reactive attitudes’ is also a necessary step on the way to something higher. Traversing that step can be the work of a lifetime.

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